



STATE OF WASHINGTON

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

711 South Capitol Way, Suite 402 • PO Box 42490 • Olympia, Washington 98504-2490

(360) 753-6770 • 1-800-233-3247 • FAX (360) 586-2282

<http://www.wa.gov/hrc>

Preliminary Status Report of Human Rights Commission Task Force - WSU

In the early spring of 2005, some employees, members, and affiliates of the State Human Rights Commission (HRC) became aware of a controversial situation at the Pullman Campus of Washington State University (WSU), surrounding a series of incidents of apparent racial harassment. After the incident was handled internally by WSU administrators, many students, faculty, and community members remained dissatisfied with the result, believing that justice had not been served. The broader civil rights community, including private groups, individuals, and government entities, expressed urgent concern and a desire to help address the situation.

HRC Executive Director Marc Brenman contacted Vice President for Equity and Diversity Dr. Mike Tate, offering assistance in addressing the situation as a neutral, objective government civil rights agency. While the primary mandate of the HRC is to address specific allegations of violations of the state law against discrimination (RCW 49.60), the Executive Director proposed that the HRC might be able to play a role pursuant to its ability to further mutual goals with public and private agencies and individuals toward eliminating discrimination. It is in this cooperative, outreach capacity, rather than its investigatory, enforcement capacity, that the HRC is addressing the situation.

Accordingly, WSU invited HRC to lead a task force to take a fresh look at the situation and make recommendations. On behalf of the HRC, Mr. Brenman formed a task force, including HRC Chair Reiko Callner, Thi Huynh, Commissioner on the State Commission on Asian and Pacific American Affairs (CAPAA), advisory members, and Mr. Brenman, as coordinator.

The task force has proceeded in close contact with the Office of the Governor and with CAPAA, which exists under the Office of the Governor. Before making formal recommendations, the task force will also solicit input from various community-based organizations.

Ms. Callner, Mr. Huynh, and Mr. Brenman, visited the WSU campus on May 1st and 2nd, in an accelerated outreach schedule. Efforts were made to respond to the frustration expressed within the WSU community. The task force worked from early morning into the night to interview as many key people as possible - over 30 - in the WSU community who were affected by the controversy. Among those interviewed included the principal students involved in the underlying incidents, faculty, student leaders in a variety of organizations, staff, and administrators.

Those interviewed were questioned as to their views of the immediate situation and with respect to larger aspects of the community "climate" at WSU. In the course of gathering



information, all participants were cooperative and readily provided the task force with relevant documents and materials when requested.

The information gathered has led to a more complete understanding of the dynamics leading to the current sense of crisis. The task force observed many commonly-voiced areas of concern, including a lack of transparency, trust in the system, and clear articulation of goals. There is great potential for relationship building and improvement in areas of misconception and communication-barriers that inhibit a more fully integrated campus experience. The task force is committed to elaborating on these issues and will be developing recommendations and referrals for resources in time for the upcoming Board of Regents meeting in June.

While frustration, anger, and a sense of misunderstanding have been voiced, the task force outreach team gained the impression from this early, intense immersion that overall, this is a university community dedicated to the best possible potential of each of its constituents. Though communication lapses, misperceptions and historical issues have created mistrust, and people have experienced pain in the process, it is evident to the outreach members of the task force that the WSU constituents share a strong desire for justice and for fair treatment. They are optimistic that change for the better is possible, and under the right conditions, are willing to work together to facilitate that change. The task force is hopeful that, thanks to the good will of all the parties, solutions can be found to mend relationships and restore trust. Many individuals and groups perceiving themselves deeply at odds with each other actually share common sentiments. It is therefore important to have channels of communication available in which these groups may effectively express their common concerns.

The task force is dedicated to remaining involved with the WSU community in this endeavor. We intend to deliver a full report on our observations from the early outreach experience, including a description of some of the broader themes contributing to what has lead to some failures in the present situation.

We shall also deliver a thoughtful set of recommendations for implementation to the various players in the WSU community beyond the administration, including various commissions, departments, and student organizations. Among the resources made available will be community organizations, sister educational organizations, individuals, and written/net materials. We will strive to provide the tools and recommendations in this ongoing process of genuine inclusion and respect for all aspects of the WSU family.

We applaud the community's readiness to acknowledge the need for assistance and openness to change where change is plainly needed. Those encountered have manifested a readiness to shift their energy from disappointment and recrimination to a renewed sense of community and dedication, which reflects great potential moral courage and magnanimity. The task force appreciates the kindness and cooperation of all.